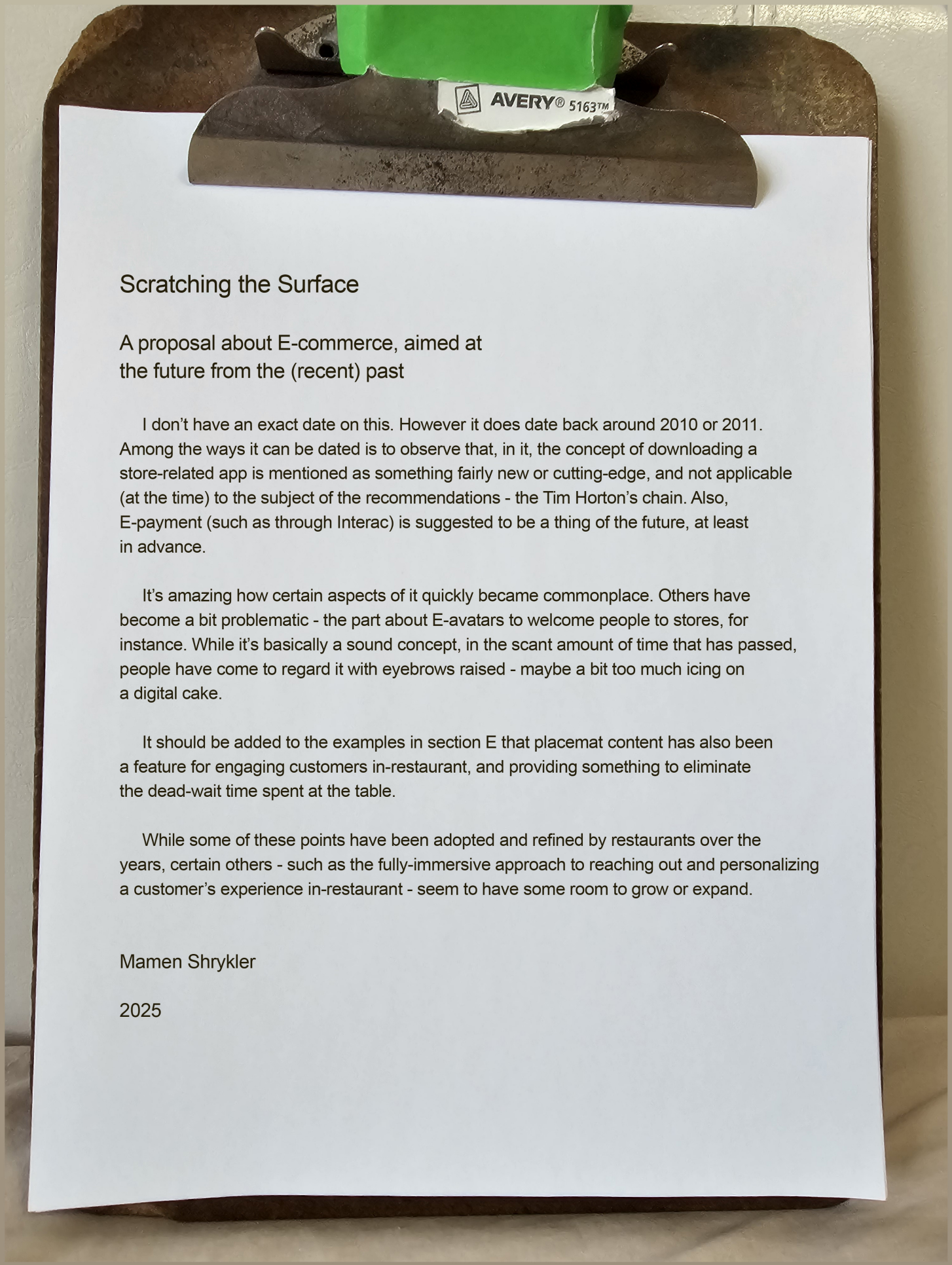

Scratching the Surface

A proposal about E-commerce, aimed at the future from the (recent) past

I don't have an exact date on this. However it does date back around 2010 or 2011. Among the ways it can be dated is to observe that, in it, the concept of downloading a store-related app is mentioned as something fairly new or cutting-edge, and not applicable (at the time) to the subject of the recommendations - the Tim Horton's chain. Also, E-payment (such as through Interac) is suggested to be a thing of the future, at least in advance.

It's amazing how certain aspects of it quickly became commonplace. Others have become a bit problematic - the part about E-avatars to welcome people to stores, for instance. While it's basically a sound concept, in the scant amount of time that has passed, people have come to regard it with eyebrows raised - maybe a bit too much icing on a digital cake.

It should be added to the examples in section E that placemat content has also been a feature for engaging customers in-restaurant, and providing something to eliminate the dead-wait time spent at the table.

While some of these points have been adopted and refined by restaurants over the years, certain others - such as the fully-immersive approach to reaching out and personalizing a customer's experience in-restaurant - seem to have some room to grow or expand.

Mamen Shrykler

2025

A simple proposal

E-COMMERCE OF THE FUTURE – TODAY

Platform: the humble (or, now, auspicious) neighborhood Tim Horton's establishment

This is a simple series of steps, envisioned for the layperson such as you, me or someone else reading this proposal – which depicts what a typical visit to Tim Horton's would consist of, using this fully integrated system of e-commerce – ALL OF WHICH is technologically possible, and affordable, using technology *already in place in restaurants today.*

A – THE APP

Tim Horton's provides a *free smartphone-based app* – similar to the tens of thousands already developed and downloaded on smartphones – which customers are encouraged to download, for free, through advertising. (In the event of such an app already having been distributed, the new one would be promoted as an upgrade or modification to existing one) - Anyone who has made use of the Apple 'app store' for iPhone, or the Android 'play store', or similar connections, will understand that such an app would take no more than a minute to click on, install, and make fully functional.

Developing the 'app' would represent the *only* significant cost or time investment in the entire process. *Using* the app (if its design is sufficiently 'user-friendly') is something which *all* smartphone users (whose numbers appear to be growing significantly every day) will be able to master almost as soon as they install it. There will be virtually no learning curve.

The presence of the app on a user's phone would, itself, enhance the customer's personal relationship with Tim Horton's. Every time the app was clicked on, a new 'branding' experience would happen, reinforcing the positive effects of viewing the Tim Horton's *logo, signature sounds, animation, visual effects*, and other app-based devices.

B – GPS

The app's main function would be to *take a person's casual relationship with their local Tim Horton's and make it more personal*. One way this could be done would be to marshal the already-existing GPS location service offered by many smartphones, to both alert a user to the fact that they were *near* one of several local Tim's outlets, and also to give a flash update on any immediate *specials* offered at that location – the nature of the special might change from location to location. At any rate, GPS technology could be used to establish a more personal relationship between the user and their local establishment, by 'reaching out' digitally – the end result of which would be a small, unobtrusive alert, like many a user receives within the course of a day – which could be accepted or ignored at the user's discretion. Clicking on the alert could take them to the fully opened app.

C – ARRIVAL AT STORE

Here's where Tim Horton's could get in on the vanguard of customer / store relations: The purpose of this step would be to *alert the store's system that the customer has arrived,* and also to *provide feedback to the customer that they are welcome, and that their experience with the establishment has begun as soon as they enter Tim Horton's doorway*. The choice could be made between falling back on a current technology – that of the QR (quick response) code, those visual replacements for UPC coding which allow 'instant cellphone interface' with a black and white square graphic printed on any medium – or something similar.

In the case of a QR code, customers would need to have opened the app by the time the store is entered. This would be reinforced by advertising. It would be up to a customer to *point the phone's camera at the QR square and scan it* – not a complicated series of tasks, if it's ever been done before – but this could be prompted by the app, if already open. Similar options might consist of some kind of RFID, a short-range broadcast chip embedded either in a cell phone or

the entrance to the store itself, which would easily and quickly interface with the user's phone to assert the same data as a QR code would – that *the customer (who had a personal profile) had entered the store*. This information – that a known and trusted member of the Tim Horton's community was now on site – would be extremely valuable for the store's management team, especially since it would allow them to begin giving the customer as personal and warm a response as possible, all focused on the intent of selling more products to more happy customers.

The first thing he 'app' could ask a customer would be: *Would you prefer a seat, or to wait in line for service*?

The possibility of table service *might* represent a large digression from the ordinary policy of Tim Horton's – but, in the case of *establishing customer relations*, possibly a very important one. Many customers would opt for the 'line up' approach, reasoning that (if time were really of the essence) it would be faster, and allow a smoother exit with the goods purchased. They'd be correct in making that assumption. Offering customers a choice between table service for longer visits and counter service for more expeditious ones would put a customer's mind at ease, and further enhance the personal side of Tim Horton's service.

If this app's system fulfilled its purpose, to *alert the store's system of what was happening with the customer on a minute-by-minute basis* and so to increase speed and efficiency of service, it would add value to the average customer's experience.

Re-defining the idea of in-store seating – that is, taking it from its current status as *virtually dead space*, and making it personal by *enhancing the reasons for being there* of both customers and staff – would greatly advance the goal of *making more personal* that this system would offer.

D – THE LINE OPTION

Standing in the food line, cafeteria-style, seems to have been settled on as the method of customer relations of choice at the existing Tim Horton's. It shouldn't be hard to appreciate that this method of customer interaction involves little motion on behalf of staff, predictable circulation on behalf of customers, and an all-around predictability (in most cases) of customer activity. The area where it can be drastically improved, though, is in *what happens during the down-time* or how best to use the wait interval. Better use of this dead-waiting time will also result in a welcome shortening of service time, once the customers do make their way to the counter. This enhances the customer service experience for all concerned.

Back to the app: Once customers have indicated they prefer to get into the line to the counter (instead of have table service), the app makes the entire menu visually available to them – tailored according to what's available at the store in question. There are already several methods of making customers aware of choices (and steering them towards house specialties) – menu boards being one, visual display of food items being another. This most recent addition to the array would offer one thing that simple display methods can't, though – the customer's ability to *pre-order* items from any position in the line.

One school of restaurant management holds that the personal intuition of a manager, or staff, can lead to 'anticipation of customer wants and needs' – and that such an understanding could result in making practices such as *pre-preparing entire food items* effective. This is rarely the case. It's guess work at best – like the technique of *pouring drinks ahead of time* – if a manager asserts the most popular drink is Pepsi, then 5 Pepsi's are poured ahead of any customer order. At best, this results in enhanced service. At worst, though, it results in flat drinks, disappointed customers and plenty more waste than otherwise.

The app-based pre-ordering is *not* like that. It involves no guess work – all it does is give a predictable lead-time on *existing*, not theoretical, orders. The only opportunity a customer's food would have to go flat / lukewarm / otherwise stale, would be a wildly unpredictable line-up time – say, over ten minutes – which is already seen as undesirably over the top in such food establishments. That is: Given normal wait time estimates (up to five or so minutes) the amount of time food spends waiting for a customer would be acceptable – especially given that, over

time, dedicated employees would find ways of anticipating a customer's position in line and, by habit, reducing the gap to almost zero. Either way, the act of *making the system more responsive to the needs of an individual customer* would justify whatever small accommodations might be required to implement it. Essentially, having a pre-order system based on customer's in-line feedback would change almost nothing about the way orders are prepared. What it would do is enhance speed and overall effectiveness, while again making the experience more personal for the customer.

Another great benefit here, and enhancement of the personal, is the chance to *pre-recommend menu items* for individuals based on the *customer profile* they already have. Once the system has 'keyed-in' to the customer's identity (as soon as they open the app), their entire purchase history can be noted. At this point customers can be asked something along the lines of "Would we be able to get the bacon and eggs special started for you again this morning"? or something similar, based both on preference and time of day.

E – THE SEATED OPTION

It is here that the 'new system' or something very much like it has the largest potential to spread its wings and fly across new terrain. There are really two options here: Seat – based electronics and *all cell-phone-based electronics* – both of which offer exciting potential for new types of customer service, but the second of which – *making the entire experience app-based* – being considerably cheaper and easier to implement, since it is almost totally software – based.

The first objective would be to assert *where a given customer is sitting.* Customers would be free to pick seats as they normally would, at Tim Horton's – with the difference that, now, a simple printed code (QR code) would be attached to each table, in an unobtrusive place (say, a patch of the wall touching the table nearby where you might expect to find a salt shaker). Either this, or, like the entrance way, some kind of invisible RFID – based approach to interface with the cell phone. Either way, a customer's presence would be noted at a given location in – house and then things would really start rolling.

Here's where the system's benefits would become really obvious. The first thing the app would do, would be to *connect the customer with the store* using feedback. One of two things could happen: A visual computer *avatar* – that is, real-time generated, user-friendly character in close profile – would pop up, to welcome you to your seat. If, through customer records, it perceived you were taking your 'regular' seat, that could be included in the greeting. The avatar might also comment on the weather, or whatever else the customer had taken an interest in before. This could be very broad – based, gleaning data from a wide variety of sources – not even necessarily limited to what's been done inside the store.

The second thing that might happen, instead of an avatar, is that the visual interface in the app might actually connect you with *someone inside the store itself* – say, head of the service staff – who, using a small webcam, would relay greetings and begin the process of guiding customers towards their order. If this were done by an actual human being, the employee would have a screen in front of them detailing the customer's past history, propensity to spend, and other things – to help them give better service.

A usual-length wait would follow between ordering time and service. *However* – not included in that would be the customary dead-sitting time at the customer's table, trying to catch the attention of the server – pre-ordering via smartphone would render that unnecessary. The smartphone would *also*, after the ordering had been done, offer a series of puzzles, diversions, other food advertising or cyber – based chat – which would be built in to the app, and would take away the expected secondary dead-wait time in between order placement and receiving it. All of this would be a real-time re-affirmation that the restaurant was aware of customer's needs, and treated each customer uniquely and with respect. It might actually make a process previously thought of as slow and unrewarding – into one thought of as being fun.

Similar at – table engagements *have* been used in the past, and, at certain places, *continue* to be used, often with great effect. Examples range from the 50's – era table-side jukeboxes, to the Rainforest Café's theme park - inspired animatronic musical revues / simulated thunderstorms. This, though, just to re-state the purpose – would be accomplished on a significantly more software based, and therefore cheaper, scale. Not only would it be done for less than these previous schemes, but with a *greater* degree of customer involvement – due to understanding of a customer's profile.

F – GENERAL FLEXIBILITY

The trend toward greater flexibility in customer – server relations is at the core of the betterment of service over time. Putting less pressure on both customers and severs to do anything but simply relax and enjoy the total dining experience is a step in the right direction – and encourages one to envision the other as a friend, more than just a business associate. These principles are well-known and respected in some of the longest lasting and most profitable taverns, public houses and restaurants around. There's no reason that technology can't be used to facilitate more good will of this nature at every level of service, even the most typically mundane and anonymous.

Having a customer's total history *on file* and using that as the *bedrock basis* for customer relations allows an almost total flexibility as never before. Ideally, this system would allow managers to give customers *leeway* based on how good they'd been over time. Payment hasn't been discussed this far, but it should be.

The pre-order system is one way of making sure that the ugly phenomenon of *dine-and-dash* doesn't happen more than once. Not only that, it has the potential to *resolve* certain of these issues, not just sweep them aside – it's hard to say what would make a customer turn on the establishment and grab food and go – but it's a safe bet economics have a lot to do with it. Using the new methods of digital flexibility, customers could be given (and notified of having been given) almost infinite chances to either redeem themselves (pay up for all goods and services) or, as a last resort, not be served. The fact is, though, most people *do* want to pay for their service – they want to be upright citizens and support their local establishment. It could be that 'reminding' them is all it takes.

Pre-ordering has implications beyond the borders of the establishment, though. If the system (he app itself) could be finely – enough tuned to allow for this (and it probably could be), a customer could decide they're going to be craving maple filled donuts in about 45 minutes. A remote order could be place, even halfway across the city. After an ETA was given, the customer would simply have to make his or her way across town at the appointed time, to be greeted with the exactly-ordered number of hot, fresh donuts. More lead time, here, would work to everyone's advantage.

Payment flexibility is an issue still contested in various places today – but is also one rapidly being resolved. Aside from instant, tap – and – pay methods pioneered for on-site terminals, the future holds many wide-open possibilities for resolving payment. An arrangement with the home bank might allow the app to set-up and authorize payment as soon as the order is placed, funds transferred straight from a bank or Credit Card. Debit seems to be coming into its own in that respect. It may be, in the very near future, that the whole arrangement of payment is not only cashless, but set up at the user's convenience, ahead of the store visit, to save everybody trouble.

G – SUMMARY

When you see how open ended, and virtually limitless, the possibility for reforming the way a restaurant contributes to the personal lives of its customers can be, you'll realize this is not transitory and is almost universally adaptable to clients & conditions. In fact – the surface of such possibilities hasn't even been fully scratched yet.